

Overview

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has tracked the achievement of Hispanic students since 1975. Although many English learners are in the Hispanic designation, English learners as a group have only recently been disaggregated in the NAEP analyses. Recent analysis of long-term trends⁸ reveals that the achievement gap between Hispanics and Whites in reading has been significantly reduced over the past 30 years for 9-year-olds and 17-year-olds (although not for 13-year-olds).⁹

Despite apparent progress in the earlier grades, major problems persist. For instance, the 2005 achievement gap of 35 points in reading between fourth-grade English learners and non-English learners was greater than the Black-White achievement gap.¹⁰ And the body of scientific research on effective instructional strategies is limited for teaching English learners.¹¹

There have been some significant recent advances. Of particular note is the increase in rigorous instructional research with English learners. Districts and states have increasingly assessed progress of English learners in academic areas and in English language development. Several examples in the literature illustrate success stories among English learners—both for individual students and for schools. These students, despite having to learn English while mastering a typical school curriculum, have “beaten the odds” in academic achievement.¹²

How can we increase the chances that more English learners will achieve these successes? To answer, we must turn first to research. Unfortunately, there has not

been sufficient research aimed at understanding how to improve the quality of literacy instruction for English learners. Only about a dozen studies reach the level of rigor necessary to determine that specific instructional practices or programs do, in fact, produce significantly better academic outcomes with English learners. This work has been analyzed and reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse (the work of the Clearinghouse is integrated into our text when relevant; new studies will be added periodically).

Despite the paucity of rigorous experimental research, we believe that the available evidence allows us to provide practical recommendations about aspects of instruction on which research has cast the sharpest light. This research suggests—as opposed to demonstrates—the practices most likely to improve learning for English learners.

Over the years many terms have been used to refer to children who enter school using a language other than English: limited English proficiency (LEP), English as a second language (ESL), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), second language learners, language minority students, and so on. In this Practice Guide we use “English learners” because we feel it is the most descriptive and accurate term for the largest number of children. This term says nothing about children’s language proficiency or how many other languages they may use—it simply recognizes that they are learning English.

This Practice Guide provides five recommendations, integrated into a coherent and comprehensive approach for improving the reading achievement and English language development of English learners in the elementary grades.

Recommendations

1. Conduct formative assessments with English learners using English language measures of phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading. Use these data to identify English learners who require additional instructional support and to monitor their reading progress over time **(Level of Evidence: Strong)**.
2. Provide focused, intensive small-group interventions for English learners determined to be at risk for reading problems. Although the amount of time in small-group instruction and the intensity of this instruction should reflect the degree of risk, determined by reading assessment data and other indicators, the interventions should include the five core reading elements (phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Explicit, direct instruction should be the primary means of instructional delivery **(Level of Evidence: Strong)**.
3. Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day. Teach essential content words in depth. In addition, use instructional time to address the meanings of common words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned **(Level of Evidence: Strong)**.
4. Ensure that the development of formal or academic English is a key instructional goal for English learners, beginning in the primary grades. Provide curricula and supplemental curricula to accompany core reading and mathematics series to support this goal. Accompany with relevant training and professional development **(Level of Evidence: Low)**.
5. Ensure that teachers of English learners devote approximately 90 minutes a week to instructional activities in which pairs of students at different ability levels or different English language proficiencies work together on academic tasks in a structured fashion. These activities should practice and extend material already taught **(Level of Evidence: Strong)**.

One major theme in our recommendations is the importance of intensive, interactive English language development instruction for all English learners. This instruction needs to focus on developing academic language (the decontextualized language of the schools, the language of academic discourse, of texts, and of formal argument). This area, which researchers and practitioners feel has been neglected, is one of the key targets in this Guide.

Checklist for carrying out the recommendations

Recommendation 1. Screen for reading problems and monitor progress

✔ Districts should establish procedures for—and provide training for—schools to screen English learners for reading problems. The same measures and assessment approaches can be used with English learners and native English speakers.

✔ Depending on resources, districts should consider collecting progress monitoring data more than three times a year for English learners at risk for reading problems. The severity of the problem should dictate how often progress is monitored—weekly or bi-weekly for students at high risk of reading problems.

✔ Data from screening and progress monitoring assessments should be used to make decisions about the instructional support English learners need to learn to read.

✔ Schools with performance benchmarks in reading in the early grades can use the same standards for English learners and for native English speakers to make adjustments in instruction when progress is not sufficient. It is the opinion of the panel that schools should not consider below-grade-level performance in reading as “normal” or something that will resolve itself when oral language proficiency in English improves.

✔ Provide training on how teachers are to use formative assessment data to guide instruction.

Recommendation 2. Provide intensive small-group reading interventions

✔ Use an intervention program with students who enter the first grade with weak reading and prereading skills, or with older elementary students with reading problems.

✔ Ensure that the program is implemented daily for at least 30 minutes in small, homogeneous groups of three to six students.

✔ Provide training and ongoing support for the teachers and interventionists (reading coaches, Title I personnel, or paraeducators) who provide the small-group instruction.

✔ Training for teachers and other school personnel who provide the small-group interventions should also focus on how to deliver instruction effectively, independent of the particular program emphasized. It is important that this training include the use of the specific program materials the teachers will use during the school year. But the training should also explicitly emphasize that these instructional techniques can be used in other programs and across other subject areas.

Recommendation 3. Provide extensive and varied vocabulary instruction

✔ Adopt an evidence-based approach to vocabulary instruction.

✔ Develop districtwide lists of essential words for vocabulary instruction. These words should be drawn from the core reading program and from the textbooks used in key content areas, such as science and history.

- ✓ Vocabulary instruction for English learners should also emphasize the acquisition of meanings of everyday words that native speakers know and that are not necessarily part of the academic curriculum.

**Recommendation 4.
Develop academic English**

- ✓ Adopt a plan that focuses on ways and means to help teachers understand that instruction to English learners must include time devoted to development of academic English. Daily academic English instruction should also be integrated into the core curriculum.
- ✓ Teach academic English in the earliest grades.

- ✓ Provide teachers with appropriate professional development to help them learn how to teach academic English.

- ✓ Consider asking teachers to devote a specific block (or blocks) of time each day to building English learners' academic English.

**Recommendation 5.
Schedule regular peer-assisted
learning opportunities**

- ✓ Develop plans that encourage teachers to schedule about 90 minutes a week with activities in reading and language arts that entail students working in structured pair activities.
- ✓ Also consider the use of partnering for English language development instruction.

Recommendation 1. Screen for reading problems and monitor progress

Conduct formative assessments with English learners using English language measures of phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading. Use these data to identify English learners who require additional instructional support and to monitor their reading progress over time.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Districts should establish procedures for—and provide training for—schools to screen English learners for reading problems. The same measures and assessment approaches can be used with English learners and native English speakers.

Research shows that early reading measures, administered in English, can be used to screen English learners for reading problems. This finding is important because until recently it was widely believed that an absence of oral proficiency in English prevented English learners from learning to read in English,¹³ thus limiting the utility of early screening measures. The common practice was to wait until English learners reached a reasonable level of oral English proficiency before assessing them on measures of beginning reading. In fact, oral language measures of syntax, listening comprehension, and oral vocabulary do not predict who is likely to struggle with learning to read.¹⁴ Yet research has consistently found that early reading measures administered in English are an excellent means for screening English learners, even those who know little English.¹⁵

It is very important to assess phonological processing, alphabet knowledge, phonics, and word reading skills. These measures, whether administered at the middle or end of kindergarten (or at the beginning of the first grade) have been shown to accurately predict later reading performance in all areas: word reading,¹⁶ oral reading fluency,¹⁷ and reading comprehension.¹⁸ So, it is essential to administer some type of screening to provide evidence-based beginning reading interventions to students in the primary grades.

In no way do these findings suggest that oral language proficiency and comprehension are unimportant in the early grades. These language abilities are critical for long-term success in school.¹⁹ We expand on this point in Recommendation 4, by discussing the importance of directly teaching academic English. The assessment findings point to effective ways to screen English learners for reading problems and to determine whether they are making sufficient progress in foundational areas of early reading.

2. Depending on resources, districts should consider collecting progress monitoring data more than three times a year for English learners at risk for reading problems. The severity of the problem should dictate how often progress is monitored—weekly or bi-weekly for students at high risk of reading problems.²⁰

3. Data from screening and progress monitoring assessments should be used to make decisions about the instructional support English learners need to learn to read.

Data from formative assessments should be used to modify (and intensify) the reading and English language development (or ESL) instruction a child receives. These interventions should be closely aligned with the core reading program. Possible

interventions are described in Recommendation 2.

Caveat: Measures administered at the beginning of kindergarten will tend to over-identify students as “at risk.”²¹ A better indication of how students will respond to school instruction comes from performance scores from the middle and end of kindergarten. These scores should be used to identify students requiring serious instructional support. Scores from the beginning of kindergarten can provide a

general sense of students’ early literacy skills, but these scores should not be used as an indication of how well students are likely to respond to instruction.

4. Schools with performance benchmarks in reading in the early grades can use the same standards for English learners and for native English speakers to make adjustments in instruction when progress is insufficient. It is the opinion of the panel that schools should not consider below-grade-level performance in reading as “normal” or something that will

Summary of evidence to support this recommendation

This recommendation is based on a large number of studies that used reading assessment measures with English learners. **Level of Evidence: Strong.**

Twenty-one studies demonstrated that three types of measures—phonological processing, letter and alphabetic knowledge, and reading of word lists or connected text—are valid means of determining which English learners are likely to benefit from typical classroom reading instruction and which children will require extra support (see appendix 1 for details).²² The primary purpose of these measures is to determine whether interventions are necessary to increase the rate of reading achievement. These measures meet the standards of the American Psychological Association for valid screening instruments.²³

For students in kindergarten and grade 1. The early screening measures for kindergarten and the first grade fit into three categories:

- Measures of phonological awareness—such as segmenting the phonemes in a word, sound blending, and rhyming—are useful in both kindergarten and first grade.²⁴
- Measures of familiarity with the alphabet and the alphabetic principle, especially measures of speed and accuracy in letter naming and phonological recoding,

are useful in both kindergarten and first grade.²⁵

- Measures of reading single words and knowledge of basic phonics rules are useful in first grade.²⁶ Toward the middle and end of the first grade, and in the next few grades, measures of reading connected text accurately and fluently are useful.²⁷

For students in grades 2 to 5. Three studies have demonstrated that oral reading fluency measures are valid screening measures for English learners and are positively associated with performance on comprehensive standardized reading tests. Oral reading fluency is emerging as a valid indicator of reading progress over time for English learners.²⁸

These criterion-related validity studies are particularly important because another set of studies has investigated whether English learners can attain rates of reading growth comparable with those of their monolingual peers. These studies have demonstrated that English learners can learn to read in English at the same rate as their peers in the primary grades (K–2).²⁹ Much of this evidence comes from research in Canada and from schools providing intensive and systematic instruction for all children, supplementary instruction for those falling behind, and instruction in settings where growth in oral proficiency is supported by both peer and teacher-student interactions. Evidence on reading interventions for English learners in the United States is the focus of Recommendation 2.

resolve itself when oral language proficiency in English improves.

Using the same standards for successful reading performance with English learners and native English speakers may mean that a higher percentage of English learners will require more intensive reading instruction to reach the benchmarks, but we believe that this early emphasis on strong reading instruction will be helpful in the long run. Providing intensive early reading instruction for English learners does not imply they have a reading disability or they are not able to learn to read as well as other students. It means that while they are learning a new language and learning to read in that language simultaneously, they face challenges other students do not face. The instruction they receive should reflect the nature of this challenge.

A score on a screening measure indicating that an English learner may be at risk for reading difficulties does not mean the child has a reading disability. Being at risk means that the English learner needs extra instructional support to learn to read. This support might simply entail additional time on English letter names and letter sounds. In other cases additional support might entail intensive instruction in phonological awareness or reading fluency. Additional diagnostic assessments can be administered to determine what areas require instructional attention.

Unless districts have considerable resources and expertise, they should not try to develop the formative assessment materials on their own. Several screening and progress monitoring materials that have been developed and tested with native-English-speaking students are appropriate to use with English learners. Information about formative assessments can be found from a number of sources, including the Web and commercial developers. Please

note that the authors of this Guide did not conduct a comprehensive review of available assessments (such a large undertaking was beyond the scope of this project), and individual schools and districts should be careful when selecting assessments to use. It is important to select assessments that are reliable and valid.

5. Provide training on how teachers are to use formative assessment data to guide instruction.

The primary purpose of the formative assessment data is to determine which students are at risk (or not making sufficient progress) and to increase the intensity of reading instruction systematically for those students. We recommend that school-based teams of teachers be trained to examine formative assessment data to identify which English learners are at risk and to determine what instructional adjustments will increase reading progress. These teams can be for one grade or across grades. We believe that the reading coach, in schools that have one, should play a key role on these teams. Although principals should also play an important leadership role, it may be difficult for them to attend all meetings or be extensively involved.

Possible roadblocks and solutions

1. Some teachers believe that reading problems may resolve themselves once English learners develop proficiency in oral English. So, they are hesitant to refer these students for additional assistance or to provide intensive instruction in foundational areas of beginning reading.

There is no evidence to support the position that early reading problems experienced by English learners will resolve themselves once oral language skills in English are established.³⁰ Districts should develop and disseminate materials explaining that

using English oral language proficiency is as accurate as flipping a coin to decide which English learners are likely to have difficulty learning how to read.

To demonstrate that phonological, letter knowledge, and word reading measures are effective screening measures, principals and reading coaches can look at data from their own schools and see the links between scores on these measures in kindergarten and the first grade and later scores on state reading assessments.

2. Some teachers may feel that it is unfair to test a child in a language that she or he does not understand.

Although this is true in many areas, it is not true for tasks involving phonological processing, as long as the child understands the nature of the task.³¹ If students possess phonemic awareness of a word such as *cake* or *fan*, even without knowing the meaning they should be able to tell the examiner the first, middle, and last sounds in the word. Phonological awareness is an auditory skill that greatly helps students with reading development, and it transfers across languages. That is, if students learn the structure of sounds in one language, this knowledge will help them identify individual sounds in a second language without being taught explicitly what those individual sounds are. It is possible to demonstrate this to teachers by having them pull apart the sounds in words from an unfamiliar language, such as Russian or Arabic. Reading coaches can demonstrate that once a student knows how to identify the beginning, ending, or middle sound of a word, knowing the meaning of a word is irrelevant in being able to reproduce the sound.

Teachers should be clear that, for phonological processing tasks to be valid, English learners have to understand the

task, but this is different from knowing word meanings. For an assessment to be valid the examiner must clearly explain the nature of the task and the child must understand what she or he is being asked to do. If possible, adults who are fluent in the child's native language can be hired and trained to administer assessments. But good training is essential. When appropriate, the examiner can explain or clarify the task in the language the child understands best. For districts with many native languages and few professional educators fluent in each native language, it is possible to make CDs of instruction in the appropriate native languages.

Make sure at least two or three practice items are provided before formal administration, when the task is modeled for the child and corrective feedback is provided. This will give all children (especially English learners) the opportunity to understand what the task requires of them. An important consideration for all assessments is to follow the testing guidelines and administration protocols provided with the assessment. It is acceptable to provide practice examples or explanations in the student's native language outside the testing situation. During the testing, however, it is essential that all assessment directions and protocols be followed. Remember, the purpose of the assessment is to determine whether children are phonologically aware or know the letters of the alphabet. It is not to determine how quickly or well children learn the formative assessment task when they are given explicit instruction in how to complete the task.

3. Some teachers may feel that native language assessments are more valid than English language measures for this group of students.

Formative early reading assessments in English are valid for English learners.³² If

district and state policies permit testing a child in her or his native language, it is possible to get a richer picture of her decoding skills or familiarity with the alphabet. But this is not necessary for phonological awareness because it easily transfers across languages. Students who have this awareness in their native language will be able to demonstrate it on an English language assessment as long as they understand the task.³³ In other words, even students who are limited in English will be able to demonstrate knowledge of phonological awareness and decoding in English.

4. Districts should anticipate that schools will have a tendency to view data collection as the terminal goal of conducting formative assessments, especially early in the process.

It is important to remind school personnel that data collection is just one step in the process. The goal of collecting formative assessment data is to identify students who are not making adequate progress and to increase the intensity of instruction for these students. In a system where the performance of all children is assessed multiple times a year, it is easy to become consumed by ways of organizing, analyzing, and presenting data and to lose sight of the primary purpose of data collection: to determine which students need extra support and which do not.

5. In districts that have the same early reading goals and standards for English learners and non-English learners, it is likely that the current performance of many English learners will be below these standards.

Although the average performance of English learners may be lower than that of non-English learners, there is no reason to assume that English learners cannot make the reading progress necessary to reach high standards of performance.³⁴ This progress will require providing more intensive instruction than the district might normally provide in both reading and language development.

6. Teachers may focus too much on what is tested—phonemic skills, decoding ability, and oral reading fluency—and neglect instruction in comprehension and vocabulary.

In monitoring student progress in phonological processing, phonics, and reading fluency, instruction in the development of comprehension and higher order thinking skills may be overlooked. But these skills should not be neglected. Instruction in comprehension and higher order skills should receive attention in the earliest phases of reading development. The challenge for schools will be to maintain a strong instructional focus on both higher and lower order skills.

Recommendation 2. Provide intensive small-group reading interventions

Provide focused, intensive small-group interventions for English learners determined to be at risk for reading problems. Although the amount of time in small-group instruction and the intensity of this instruction should reflect the degree of risk, determined by reading assessment data and other indicators, the interventions should include the five core reading elements (phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Explicit, direct instruction should be the primary means of instructional delivery.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Use an intervention program with students who enter the first grade with weak reading and prereading skills, or with older elementary students with reading problems.³⁵

Because there are many similarities between the three programs assessed here, we conclude that other programs that follow the same principles of direct and explicit instruction to teach core reading elements in small groups are likely to have the same beneficial effects. The major instructional principles that characterize the three programs are:

- Multiple opportunities for students to respond to questions.
- Multiple opportunities for students to practice reading both words and sentences, either in a small group or with a peer.

- Clear feedback from the teacher when students make errors.
- Explicit instruction in all areas of reading, including explicit comprehension instruction and explicit vocabulary instruction. Sufficient coverage of five areas—phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—should be a key criterion in selecting an intervention program for use in the school district.³⁶

2. Ensure that the program is implemented daily for at least 30 minutes in small, homogeneous groups of three to six students.

Students make gains in reading when they have daily instruction in small homogeneous groups based on reading skill and receive explicit, clear, direct instruction.³⁷ So, there is no compelling reason why all students in the group need to be English learners. In fact, we think there could be advantages to groups that include native English speakers and English learners because native English speakers can provide models of more advanced English language usage. But to ensure that students can accelerate their learning, students who are making solid progress based on ongoing assessments should be regrouped (for example, move students making rapid progress to higher performing groups).³⁸

3. Provide training and ongoing support for the teachers and interventionists (reading coaches, Title I personnel, or paraeducators) who provide the small-group instruction.³⁹

Each of the four research studies that produced a positive impact on reading achievement involved extensive training of the teachers and interventionists. This training is most effective when all personnel who work with English learners participate together in the same professional development activities.⁴⁰

One key aspect of these interventions is pacing. It is particularly important that the teachers and interventionists receive training in how to teach these programs at an appropriate pace. This critical aspect of instruction is frequently overlooked. When it is missing from instruction, it is easy for children to become bored or to lose focus, which can lead to behavior problems.

The three intervention programs studied—and others like them—contain highly engaging activities of short duration. The Panel believes that teachers should implement the activities, what-

ever their focus, as outlined in the teacher manuals and training materials.

4. Training for teachers and other school personnel who provide the small-group interventions should also focus on how to deliver instruction effectively, independent of the particular program emphasized. It is important that this training include the use of the specific program materials the teachers will use during the school year. But the training should also explicitly emphasize that these instructional techniques can be used in other programs and across other subject areas.⁴¹

Summary of evidence to support this recommendation

This recommendation is based on four high-quality randomized controlled trials at various sites with different interventions that share core characteristics in design and content. **Level of Evidence: Strong.**

In the past several years four high-quality randomized controlled trials have been conducted on reading interventions for struggling English learners. These studies appear as *Intervention Reports* on the What Works Clearinghouse website.⁴² Appendix 1 provides technical details on the methodology used in these studies, the key findings, and statistical significance levels. These interventions used the following three programs:

- Enhanced Proactive Reading.⁴³
- Read Well.⁴⁴
- SRA Reading Mastery/SRA Corrective Reading.⁴⁵

The participants in these research studies were English learners in grades 1–5 with serious reading problems (reading at least one year below grade level or scoring in the lowest quartile on standardized tests). Reading achievement was assessed on a wide range of measures, including word reading,

comprehension, and vocabulary. The What Works Clearinghouse found that all three curricula demonstrated potentially positive effects on reading achievement. The designation *potentially positive* refers to an effect supported by at least one study but not enough studies to support the Clearinghouse’s highest evaluation of *positive*.

An important finding was that in two of the four studies the interventions demonstrated *lasting effects* on reading performance. In investigating the longitudinal effects of *Enhanced Proactive Reading*, positive achievement outcomes were maintained when students who received the intervention in the first grade were assessed at the end of the second grade.⁴⁶ Students in the first grade intervention group read at higher levels than students in the control group one year after the intervention ended. For the *SRA* program the positive reading effect was maintained two years after the intervention ended.⁴⁷

The programs used in these studies had many characteristics in common. They formed a central aspect of daily reading instruction and took between 30 and 50 minutes to implement per day. In each study program implementation involved intensive small-group instruction following the principles of direct and explicit instruction in the core areas of reading.

Examples of these techniques include instructional pacing, providing feedback to students, including error corrections, modeling, and providing wait time for student responses. For many teachers this fast-paced interactive instruction will be unfamiliar, and coaching support in the classroom will be critical for them to be effective. This training and coaching in the classroom should be provided by “master” teachers with experience in the specific program.

Possible roadblocks and solutions

1. Teachers may be uncomfortable identifying students for additional reading instruction if their English language skills are low.⁴⁸

English language proficiency is not a good gauge of how well English learners can respond to additional reading instruction (see Recommendation 1). In addition to helping with the development of critical reading skills, extra instructional time devoted to vocabulary, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension will help directly with the development of English language proficiency.

2. Students already are pulled out of class for other services (such as speech, English language development, or English as a second language). Pulling students out for additional reading instruction makes their instructional day too fragmented.

A fragmented instructional day is a legitimate concern (and not just for English learners). But the Panel believes that reading development is too important to withhold any

opportunity for small-group instruction. Reducing fragmented instruction must involve the effective coordination of services for English learners, who frequently receive additional services in multiple areas and from multiple funding sources.

3. Students will miss valuable instructional time in other areas.

Although students will miss some instruction in other areas while they are receiving additional small-group reading instruction, learning to read is critical to all other learning demands. So, time spent ensuring that students acquire strong reading skills will pay off in the long run. Evidence for this claim can be found in the sustained effects of intervention studies.⁴⁹

4. Arranging a building-level or grade-level schedule that allows for additional small-group instruction is a complex process. Individual teachers may feel that they do not have the time or resources to provide additional small-group instruction to these students.

Different professionals can provide small-group reading interventions, and schools will have to consider the options seriously if barriers to time and scheduling are to be overcome.⁵⁰ The key is training and collaboration among all personnel who provide instruction to English learners. This requires a shared focus and commitment. The benefits of having a pullout program for interventions are that students can be homogeneously grouped, receive additional time on task, and be regrouped regularly as needed to maximize learning opportunities.

Recommendation 3. Provide extensive and varied vocabulary instruction

Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day. Teach essential content words in depth. In addition, use instructional time to address the meanings of common words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned.

How to carry out the recommendation

Vocabulary instruction is essential in teaching English learners to read. It is rare that core reading programs include adequate guidelines for vocabulary instruction for English learners. So, districts need to provide teachers with tools that will help them support vocabulary development.

1. Adopt an evidence-based approach to vocabulary instruction.

The Panel believes that an evidence-based approach should require that teachers provide daily explicit vocabulary instruction. Evidence-based vocabulary instruction should be a strong part of reading instruction and an integral part of English language development. Vocabulary instruction should also be emphasized in all other parts of the curriculum, including reading, writing, science, history, and geography.

Typically, the vocabulary instruction supported by research studies is more thorough and explicit than that usually provided in classrooms.⁵¹ Researchers converge in noting that effective vocabulary

instruction includes multiple exposures to target words over several days and across reading, writing, and speaking opportunities. A small but consistent body of intervention research suggests that English learners will benefit most from rich, intensive vocabulary instruction that emphasizes “student-friendly” definitions,⁵² that engages students in the meaningful use of word meanings in reading, writing, speaking, and listening,⁵³ and that provides regular review.⁵⁴ The goal of rich vocabulary instruction is for students to develop an understanding of word meanings to the point where they can use these and related words in their communication and as a basis for further learning.⁵⁵

The core reading program used in the classroom is a good place to begin choosing words for instruction and methods for teaching them. For English learners additional words need to be identified for instructional attention, and teaching procedures need to be much richer and more extensive than instruction usually recommended within core reading programs.⁵⁶

Valuable for professional development, teacher study groups and lesson study groups can get teachers engaged in planning effective vocabulary instruction.⁵⁷ These study groups can be guided by available texts that provide evidence-based approaches to vocabulary instruction. Activities in these study groups should include a good number of hands-on activities, such as transforming textbook definitions into “student-friendly” definitions, identifying crucial words in the texts students will read, and developing daily lesson plans for intensive vocabulary instruction.⁵⁸

2. Develop districtwide lists of essential words for vocabulary instruction. These words should be drawn from the core reading program and from the textbooks used

in key content areas, such as science and history.

A major part of any vocabulary curriculum is specifying the words to be taught. It is the Panel's opinion that adopting a districtwide core vocabulary list for English learners will help focus instruction on valuable words and reduce unnecessary duplication. A core vocabulary list does not prevent teachers or students from adding to this list when problem words arise in the classroom—in fact, some districts even build in space for the addition of such words.

The lists currently identified in core reading programs are inadequate for this purpose.⁵⁹ They often fail to emphasize the words most critical for understanding a story or most useful for the child's language development. For example, many vocabulary lists stress decoding issues rather than meaning. Thus, to accomplish vocabulary instruction goals, districts must develop their own lists and provide access to these lists for their teachers.

Words for instruction should be selected carefully. Long lists of words cannot be taught in depth because rich vocabulary instruction is time intensive. Only a handful of words should be taught in intensive ways at any one time. Some authorities recommend teaching only about eight to ten words per week this way, while others suggest teaching two to three words per day (but always with lots of future review and extension).⁶⁰

Reading coaches, teacher teams, curricula specialists, and summer workshops for teachers can generate vocabulary lists for intensive instruction. A key is for teachers to have these lists as they teach reading, social studies, and science units, so they know in advance which words to teach in depth. Study groups and grade-level teams can do this work.

3. Vocabulary instruction for English learners should also emphasize the acquisition of meanings of everyday words that native speakers know and that are not necessarily part of the academic curriculum.⁶¹

Summary of evidence to support this recommendation

This recommendation is based on three studies conducted specifically with English learners. This recommendation is also indirectly supported by a strong body of research conducted with native English speakers. **Level of Evidence: Strong.**

Three intervention research studies evaluated the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction for English learners.⁶² They converge in showing that explicit and intensive vocabulary instruction helps English learners understand what they read (see appendix 1 for details). One study, appearing on the What Works Clearinghouse website,⁶³ is rated as demonstrating a *potentially positive* effect on students' English

reading comprehension.⁶⁴ It suggests that intense and explicit vocabulary instruction enhances reading comprehension. Two other studies support the impact of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension.⁶⁵

Research shows that English learners need to learn many words to catch up with their native-English-speaking peers' word knowledge.⁶⁶ Clearly, not all of the words they need to learn to make up this gap can be taught through explicit vocabulary instruction. Our recommendation thus integrates procedures from studies on explicit vocabulary instruction with English learners,⁶⁷ extensive research with native English speakers,⁶⁸ and expert opinion in establishing a comprehensive framework of vocabulary instruction for English learners.

The vocabulary gap between English learners and native English speakers is substantial because English learners do not know many of the simpler words or conversational words that native English speakers acquire before they enter school or learn in school without explicit teaching. Many of these words are crucial for understanding text and other academic content. For example, English learners may not know such words as *bank*, *take*, *sink*, or *can*. Textbook publishers assume that students know these words and do not include them as vocabulary targets. Nor do they provide recommendations for how to address teaching these words should teachers have students who do not know them. English learners can acquire these words easily if teachers provide them with brief instruction during lessons. This instruction can emphasize the meanings of common phrases and expressions, not just single words.

During reading instruction, teachers can teach many of these common words explicitly—in roughly the same way that they teach content words, but much more quickly. They can teach many words as they arise in the classroom, drawing attention to the potentially confusing words and phrases. District practice should ensure that these words are also taught and reviewed during English language development.

Possible roadblocks and solutions

1. Teaching vocabulary effectively is difficult. Many teachers will struggle learning how to provide effective vocabulary instruction to English learners.⁶⁹

Concerted professional development and coaching will be necessary to ensure that all teachers learn to provide effective vocabulary instruction to English learners. Teacher study groups can be an excellent

vehicle for work on vocabulary instruction, giving teachers a way to share their frustrations and jointly collaborate on solutions. Study groups can also be a way to keep effective vocabulary instruction in the forefront of instructional priorities. They are especially valuable when led by vocabulary experts, who can provide clear suggestions about how teachers can continue to move forward to provide effective instruction in the classroom.

Coaching teachers in effective vocabulary instruction should have a strong in-classroom component. There are routines in good vocabulary instruction that teachers can learn. For some teachers, these routines will be learned best through in-classroom coaching, where coaches provide immediate feedback and demonstrations.

2. Some teachers may incorrectly assume that English learners know a concept and the word for that concept in their primary language—when, in fact, they do not. This is particularly true for technical terms encountered in science, geography, and history. If students do not know the concept in their primary language, the Panel suggests teaching the word directly in English.

Caveat: For teachers to help English learners develop vocabulary knowledge by making connections to a student's primary language, teachers need some knowledge of the primary language. If the linguistic transfer involves a simple concept or a one-to-one correspondence between the student's primary language (each language has an identifiable word for the concept), teachers may be able to help students even when these teachers know very little of the primary language. But if the concepts are difficult or there is no clear word for the concept in the student's native language, teachers will need more extensive knowledge of the primary language to be able to help the student.

Recommendation 4. Develop academic English

Ensure that the development of formal or academic English is a key instructional goal for English learners, beginning in the primary grades. Provide curricula and supplemental curricula to accompany core reading and mathematics series to support this goal. Accompany with relevant training and professional development.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Adopt a plan that focuses on ways and means to help teachers understand that instruction to English learners must include time devoted to development of academic English. Daily academic English instruction should also be integrated into the core curriculum.

Academic English is the language of the classroom, of academic disciplines (science, history, literary analysis) of texts and literature, and of extended, reasoned discourse. It is more abstract and decontextualized than conversational English. Those who are knowledgeable about academic English know, for example, that some words used in everyday conversation, such as *fault*, *power*, or *force*, take on special meanings when used in science.

Most scholars believe that instruction in academic English—done early, consistently, and simultaneously across content areas—can make a difference in English learners' ability to understand the core curriculum and that its importance increases as children enter the upper grades.⁷⁰ But even in the primary grades,

instructional time should focus on the explicit instruction of academic English.⁷¹ Recent correlational research supports this position.⁷²

English learners do not need to master conversational oral English before they are taught the features of academic English.⁷³ In reading, knowledge of academic English helps students gain perspective on what they read, understand relationships, and follow logical lines of thought. In writing, knowledge of academic English helps students develop topic sentences, provide smooth transitions between ideas, and edit their writing effectively. Reading, discussing, and writing about texts needs to be a central part of the English language development instruction dispersed throughout the day.⁷⁴

Many teachers may be unaware of the features of academic English⁷⁵ and thus do not instruct students in the features required to succeed in school.⁷⁶ The Panel feels that the best way to promote the development of academic English is to use a curriculum with a scope and sequence aimed at building academic English. Unfortunately, the Panel knows of no existing curricular materials that have solid empirical support for this purpose. That is why it is important to select published materials carefully and to devote considerable thought and planning to how these materials will be used effectively in the classroom.

It is also unfortunate that few resources provide guidance to districts in teaching academic English to English learners. Some preliminary frameworks and guidelines—developed by Feldman and Kinsella,⁷⁷ Girard,⁷⁸ Dutro and Moran,⁷⁹ Snow and Fillmore,⁸⁰ Diaz-Rico and Weed,⁸¹ and Scarcella⁸²—list topics to address when focusing on academic English, such as adverbial forms, conditional sentences,

prepositions, words that express relationships. But these are not designed for regular use by teachers in the classroom or as an instructional manual.

Teachers will need extensive professional development and support in using curriculum materials effectively to teach academic English.⁸³

2. Teach academic English in the earliest grades.

Instruction focused on academic English should not wait until students are able to read and write in English. Before English learners are reading, the development of age-appropriate academic English—morphology, syntax, vocabulary—can be accelerated orally through planned and deliberate daily instruction.⁸⁴

Focused instruction in academic English can also build on students' work with text. For example, when English learners read expository text that includes academic language, teachers should discuss the text and the language in structured ways.⁸⁵ Instruction should also focus on teaching English learners to use specific features of academic language related to tense agreement, plurals, and proper use

of adjectives and adverbs.⁸⁶ Students need practice in using these features in the context of meaningful communication (both oral and written).⁸⁷ They also must learn to use language accurately in a range of situations—to tell stories, describe events, define words and concepts, explain problems, retell actions, summarize content, and question intentions.⁸⁸

Note: For students entering school, attention in the first year of instruction must also be devoted to informal, social language. For example, newcomers (English learners who have recently arrived in the United States) benefit greatly from immediate instruction in social language (*Hi! What's up?*) and survival language (*Help! Fire!*).⁸⁹

3. Provide teachers with appropriate professional development to help them learn how to teach academic English.

In the opinion of the Panel, professional development needs to be ongoing and to entail a specific and manageable number of key features and principles. Basic features of English morphology, syntax, and discourse need to be addressed carefully and gradually so as not to overwhelm teachers.

Summary of evidence to support this recommendation

Because there is little empirical research on the topic and primarily just expert opinion, the level of evidence is low. Two studies reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse⁹⁰ demonstrate that focused interventions in two relatively narrow areas of academic English (quality of oral narrative and syntax) are potentially effective.⁹¹ That is, evidence suggests that they lead to better outcomes in highly specific areas of formal, academic English. But because the studies address very selective aspects of academic English

and only indirectly address classroom instruction, we cannot conclude that the studies affirm the effectiveness of instruction of academic English at this time. **Level of Evidence: Low** (primarily expert opinion).

Despite the paucity of experimental research, the strong consensus of expert opinion⁹² is that English learners require considerable explicit and deliberate instruction to learn the features of the type of formal English used in the schools and in academic discourse.⁹³ This consensus applies to the importance of teaching academic English from the earliest grades.⁹⁴

Professional development should also include extensive practical activities, such as analyzing texts used by students for academic English instruction, determining features of language that students need to complete specific oral and written assignments, and designing “student-friendly” explanations. Professional development should also give teachers opportunities to practice teaching academic language with feedback.

4. Consider asking teachers to devote a specific block (or blocks) of time each day to building English learners’ academic English.

Experts agree that English learners require time each day when the primary instructional goal is developing academic English (as opposed to mastering the academic content).⁹⁵ A recent observational research study found that students’ growth in English language proficiency was much higher in classrooms where a separate block of time was devoted to ESL or English language development.⁹⁶ So, in addition to the better integration of teaching academic English in the context of academic content such as reading or mathematics, the Panel also suggests that there be specific times during the day when the primary instructional focus is on English language development and that some of the time be devoted to academic English. We are aware that this recommendation extrapolates from only one study and that this study looked at all English language development instruction, not only academic English instruction. So, this should be considered as merely a recommendation based on our opinion.

We believe that devoting specific blocks of time to academic English has three distinct advantages. First, it increases the time English learners have to learn the language. Second, instruction spaced throughout the day provides better opportunities for deep

processing and retention. Third, during English language development time, the focus is clearly on language. When teachers try to merge English language development with academics, it becomes easy to lose track of the dual objectives and focus more on teaching reading or mathematics or science than on teaching academic English. The obvious exception is writing instruction, a natural fit with teaching academic English.

It is easy to overlook academic English and to allow teachers and students to communicate in informal English. For this reason, it might be a good idea for administrators to structure specific blocks of time each day to ensure its instruction. For example, in kindergarten, the instruction of academic English can be routinely incorporated into the instruction of storytelling and vocabulary development at specific times each day. As Saunders, Foorman, and Carlson⁹⁷ have shown, providing specific blocks of instruction in English language development leads to gains in measures of oral language proficiency. In later grades, specific blocks of time dedicated to the development of academic English can be scheduled, for example, in reading and writing instruction and in the instruction of vocabulary in all subject matter. Scheduling regular blocks of time for the instruction of academic English should not only guarantee an increased focus on academic English in the classroom. It should also make teachers more diligent in structuring instructional activities that require the use of academic English and in monitoring their students’ development of academic English.

Possible roadblocks and solutions

1. Some educators may want to cushion their English learners, believing that academic English is too hard for them to develop or that the expectations are too demanding.

Many teaching approaches still advocate giving English learners highly simplified, informal texts that are easy to read but not challenging. The problem with regularly giving English learners a diet of familiar reading material is that the academic texts of assessments and most content areas remain unfamiliar. Informal, narrative texts tend to be familiar, but reading these texts does not lead to proficiency in academic English. In academic writing crammed with facts, the content is often unfamiliar to English learners.

The focus on developing academic English can come after a challenging text has been read and discussed, so that the vocabulary and meaning are clear. Then the teacher can come back to the story and focus on the aspects of language that may be problematic for English learners (sentence construction, word usage, prepositions) in the familiar text. Language-focused activities will have more meaning for English learners if they already have a general understanding of the material in the text.

2. There may not be enough time in the instructional day to provide English learners with sufficient instruction on the features of academic English.

This problem is particularly relevant when English learners enter the upper grades with little knowledge of academic English, limited reading ability, and large educational gaps. Teachers need to be aware that many features of academic English can and should be included during the block of time devoted to reading instruction. Virtually all students would benefit from activities that teach them how to build complex sentences through sentence combining—and how to use words such as *however* and *but* to build an argument. Thus, a partial solution to the time problem is to include daily academic English instruction as part of the core reading instruction delivered

to all students, including English learners and native English speakers.

3. Many teachers fail to link vocabulary instruction to instruction on proper language usage.

Even when English learners know word meanings, they may be uncertain about how to use new words appropriately. As knowledge deepens, words have to be used with the appropriate number (*goose, geese*), tense (*is, are, was*), and word form (*fun, funnier, funny*). Systematic instruction in usage and language conventions needs to be a core feature of English language development, and many of the words used should be the same words students are working with during their reading lesson. Teachers should model appropriate syntax, word order, and tense agreement and have students practice these skills with new vocabulary words. Teachers should be careful and explicit about pointing out or modeling appropriate use, as students use new vocabulary in the context of sentences that should, over time, become more complex and grammatically correct.

Note that *instruction in the proper usage of words* is very different from *correction of any and all errors a student makes in word usage*. In the Panel's view, error correction needs to be focused on the instructional target of the lesson. If the instructional focus of the vocabulary lesson is on word forms such as *success, successful, and succeed*, teachers should correct errors in word forms but ignore other errors. For instance, in the learner's sentence, "The boy is very succeed on mathematics," teachers should point out that the correct word is *successful* but should not focus on the incorrect use of the word *on*. In restating the sentence, the teacher might emphasize correct usage by saying "Yes, the boy is very *successful at* mathematics."

Recommendation 5. Schedule regular peer-assisted learning opportunities

Ensure that teachers of English learners devote approximately 90 minutes a week to instructional activities in which pairs of students at different ability levels or different English language proficiencies work together on academic tasks in a structured fashion. These activities should practice and extend material already taught.⁹⁸

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Develop plans that encourage teachers to schedule about 90 minutes a week with activities in reading and language arts that entail students working in structured pair activities.

Kindergarteners can learn peer-assisted learning techniques if the routines are reasonably simple and taught in an explicit fashion.⁹⁹ Older elementary students can learn fairly sophisticated strategies for providing peers with feedback on comprehension and vocabulary. Students can also assist each other in learning or clarifying the meanings of words in English.¹⁰⁰

The Panel recommends that the focus of the pair activities be tied to areas that emerge as key targets from a district's evaluation data. These could include oral reading fluency, vocabulary development, syntax, and comprehension strategies.

Districts should provide professional development for teachers setting up peer-assistance learning systems. Professional development should be scheduled during

the early part of the school year, so that teachers can practice immediately with their own students. Training need not be lengthy and could be provided by reading coaches. Coaches should also observe teachers as they get started and help teachers during the difficult early phases.

2. Also consider the use of partnering for English language development instruction.¹⁰¹

The Panel members know that there was no experimental research on this topic, but we still consider this to be a promising practice, based on the documented success of peer-assisted learning in other areas of language arts. During the part of the day reserved for English language development, for example, peers would work together on reading connected text to each other and then discussing the text in a structured way. Students could read short passages of text and then practice summarizing the text for a few minutes, using specific summarization strategies. Or, after reading the text, they could answer questions, generate “gist” statements, or use another comprehension procedure, such as “prediction relay,” thinking ahead in the text and predicting what might happen based on the story content to that point.

Possible roadblocks and solutions

1. Some teachers may feel that the added time required by English learners may take instructional time away from other students.

A benefit of peer-assisted instruction is that all students can participate. So, teachers do not have to plan additional activities for separate groups of students in the class. This partner work gives teachers a way to structure learning opportunities that address some of the unique learning needs of English learners. It also gives them a way to address the learning needs of other students in the class. Students who have learning

disabilities or who are low performers, as well as average and above-average students, will benefit from working with a partner in a structured way if the activities are organized and carried out appropriately.

Peer-assisted learning is not, however, a substitute for teacher-led instruction. It is an evidence-based approach intended to replace some of the independent seatwork or round-robin reading that students do, for example, when the intention is to provide practice and extended learning opportunities for students.

2. Teachers may be concerned about the time it takes to teach students the routines.

Once students have learned peer-assisted instructional routines, such as how to

respond to errors, the format can be used in a number of different content areas across grade levels. The use of peer-assisted instruction across grade levels provides a consistent and familiar structure for practicing specific content.

3. Teachers may be concerned that this takes time away from instruction.

Most teachers replace some of the independent seatwork or round-robin reading with peer-assisted learning. Again, peer-assisted learning is not a substitute for instruction. It is an opportunity for English learners to practice and work with skills and concepts they are learning. It allows students to receive feedback as they practice.

Summary of evidence to support this recommendation

This recommendation is based on several high-quality experiments and quasi experiments with English learners. In addition, many peer-assisted studies also have been conducted with native-English-speaking students, and the results have consistently supported the positive impact of peer tutoring on student learning outcomes. **Level of Evidence: Strong.**

Three high-quality experiments and quasi experiments have evaluated the effectiveness of English learners working in pairs in a structured fashion several times a week.¹⁰² These studies spanned virtually all of the elementary grade levels. All these studies demonstrated positive impacts on reading achievement for students at various ability levels. Two additional studies provide evidence of the positive impact of student activities in cooperative groups of four to six students.¹⁰³ Although less evidence supports cooperative groups than pairs of students working together, the guidance here is relevant for districts wanting to implement some type of cooperative learning structure in their schools.

Of the five studies, two were reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse and rated

as providing *potentially positive* effects on reading achievement.¹⁰⁴ One of the two met the Clearinghouse evidence standards¹⁰⁵ and the other met the standards with reservations.¹⁰⁶

Partner work is an opportunity for students to practice and extend what the teacher has taught during regular instruction. Partner work is excellent for tasks in which correct and incorrect responses can be clearly determined (word and text reading and phonological awareness activities, such as identifying sounds in words).

However, evidence also demonstrates that partner activities can build skills for tasks in which correct and incorrect responses are harder to determine, such as reading comprehension and other tasks that require student explanations. In three of the five studies, students worked in pairs to practice, consolidate, and extend prereading, decoding, comprehension, and spelling skills. In each of the studies student pairs, with different abilities in either reading or English language proficiency, were provided with clear instructional activities and taught procedures for working effectively with peers. Teachers used guides that included prompt cards and activities for students.